

## **Promises to Keep (III): To Persist**

A Sermon by Louise Westfall

Fairmount Presbyterian Church

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**Text: I Samuel 1:4-20**

A quotation by Albert Einstein is taped to my computer monitor so that I see it frequently. It's something he said in a 1905 interview, just after publication of three of his most significant papers---one that proved the existence of the atom, a second that showed the validity of quantum physics, and his groundbreaking theory of relativity. "It's not that I'm so smart," he told the reporter, "it's just that I stay with problems longer."

"To stay with problems longer" hardly requires rocket science. Yet it sometimes seems in short supply in our nano-second world. We want results and we want them now... or sooner. We are attracted to the quick fix, and become impatient when it takes longer. When confronted with setbacks or difficulties-- whether in math, marriage, in church or society, we think with amazing speed about moving on to something else. Of course there are times when persistence is just a stubborn refusal to admit reality. There are times and circumstances when it is wise to pull back from a problem, disengage, and seek another way. Yet sometimes I think we give up too easily on life's complexities and troubling questions, particularly if the results we long for are not immediately achieved. Then persistence is called for, by countering discouragement with hope and helping us resist the temptation to throw in the towel. "If you're going through Hell," Winston Churchill famously advised, "keep going" (an encouraging word to all Browns fans??).

This morning we will dedicate our financial commitments for the coming year. These commitments represent the promises we make before God and one another—promises to honor our rich history as we plan for a vibrant future; promises we make to care for another, to nurture faith across a lifespan, and to promote human flourishing in our church, city, and world. This congregation has made tremendous promises amid economic woes and financial uncertainty, the challenges of our beleaguered city, and our personal tolerance for change. Will these pledges help us succeed in our ministry and mission? Will we accomplish everything God calls us to do? Will we be able to keep our promises?

The morning Scripture lesson offers us a role model of persistence, a woman who stayed with her problem for years before the desire of her heart was realized as she held her newborn baby in her arms. Hannah's problem was an

inability to conceive, and in that patriarchal society in which a woman's worth was tied to her provision of male progeny, it was huge. Bearing a son may originally have simply been a practical goal toward safeguarding a secure future, but quickly morphed into a matter of spiritual consequence, a sign of God's blessing and promise. Childlessness was even regarded as God's punishment. Polygamy was authorized in an attempt to ensure the birth of descendents; big love? Well, big headaches. Smack dab in the middle of these complicating factors and her particular pain, there is Hannah. And she's praying, crying out to God with raw honesty and tears, and something more. Let us bring our own unsolved problems and unfulfilled hopes, and the dearest dreams we have for our church, and listen for God's Word in the reading from the first book of Samuel in the first chapter at the fourth verse. [I Samuel 1:4-20]

I wish this text had ended before the happy outcome. I wish the story had concluded with Hannah's acceptance of the situation, come what may, and her quiet confidence in God's goodness and grace. By revealing that Hannah's most fervent desire was granted and she and her husband did have a son, this story becomes a page lifted from the gospel of success proclaimed by TV preachers and best-selling authors. That is, be faithful and you'll get what you want. Hang on to God and God will grant your wish for health, wealth and happiness.

The trouble with that narrative arc is that it reduces God to an object of human invention and control; a God who exists to serve humanity and who can be directed by human pleading, prayerfully delivered. This God is a genie-in-a-lamp, bound to do the bidding of the lucky one who finds him. Friends, this is not the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition, a God who created humanity in love for relationship and whose actions are shaped not by human intent but by divine will. The God we worship and serve is the God who knows us intimately and personally, and loves each of us deeply and redemptively. This is the God who knows our need even before we ask, and who reaches out to us with unfailing mercy and compassion. This is the God who shows us that true life is far more than personal gain and happiness. This is the God who is not content merely to grant a few wishes, but who intends to save the whole creation and to establish God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven!

This is the God Hannah knew, and the One to whom she poured out her soul. She actually demonstrated persistent faith *before* she was assured of a successful outcome to her prayers. Without a whole lot of evidence that things were going to get any better for her, she kept with her problem for many years. She seemed strengthened to do so because she kept with God all those years.

Hannah reveals to us a dynamic way to live and be church; faithfully, through the years; peacefully, through every change and challenge; and confidently, though we see through future's mirror oh-so-dimly. Think with me for a few moments about this dynamic, this persistence that proved so transforming, and what it might mean for our lives and for our congregation.

Hannah's persistence was born from her relationship with God. She regarded God's trustworthiness as a given. She believed God to be present and caring. Her spiritual connection to God allowed her to be completely honest and bring all of herself before the Holy One. Do we really trust God that way? Can we trust ourselves and all we cherish to God? We are not without role models here, even beyond the Biblical patriarchs and matriarchs. I think of the men and women who founded this church, and the generations of members who persisted in sharing the good news, whose sacrifices built this building and made a difference in our city. Our tradition encourages us to trust God in everything.

Notice that Hannah's persistence was not overcome by any challenge or barrier. She was undeterred in her quest by a snippy rival, uncomprehending husband, insensitive priest. She kept the faith. If faith is a path we travel, it is one with plenty of potholes and roadblocks. We will encounter frustrating detours and those sneaky "speed control" surveillance cameras, holding us publicly accountable for our private choices. We human beings will fail. We will fall short of our best intentions. We will let each other down sometimes; the imperfect church will surely disappoint us. But that is no reason to give up or slack off. Our hope is secured by God's grace, not by our own efforts. The road is long and difficult but it will surely lead us home.

Hannah's persistence was cultivated through prayer. She prayed. And prayed. And prayed again. Her prayer was akin to conversation with an intimate friend. It's that honest. I hear her questioning and raging. I'll bet she bargained with God, and made all manner of promises. Apparently she wasn't very orderly because the priest mistakes her intensity for intoxication. She kept praying longer, even when nothing appeared to be changing. Month after month she didn't get pregnant. Yet this conversation with God mattered. The fact is, prayer changes the person who prays; it opens a space for God, for a sense of peace.

In my very first sermon from this pulpit I said that if you rearrange the letters of Britney Spears, you can spell "Presbyterian." That's true, but what I've learned since is that with those very same letters you can also spell "best in prayer." The ability to keep the promises we make with the will of our minds and the good intentions of our hearts will be nourished by our prayers. Let's

resolve never to try anything -whether it's teaching our children, serving the City, or balancing the budget---without immersing the total enterprise in prayer.

Hannah's persistence had unintended consequences. Her faithfulness yielded a blessing far beyond her personal joy at the birth of her son. Samuel would become the last of Israel's judges and the historical pivot point between the loosely-connected tribal federation and the monarchy, the throne of David. The people of Israel came to see this as a sign of God's promise throughout succeeding generations, all the way until another young woman would give birth to a baby "of the house and lineage of David" who would rule the world with truth and grace. Friends, when we pray we let go of control of the outcomes of our prayers. We place our desires, our hopes, our anxieties and vexations, into God's hands, where they will be shaped and transformed in ways we can't even imagine.

What we can control is our determination to keep the faith, to persist in the work God has called us to do. Arguably the greatest hitter of all time (in those pre-steroid days), Hank Aaron confided the secret of his success: *Always keep swinging. Whether I was in a slump or feeling badly or having trouble off the field, the only thing to do was keep swinging.* Sounds like faith to me. Keep swinging and keep praying and keep loving and keep dreaming. May God help us fight the good fight, finish the race, and keep the faith.

TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH ABUNDANTLY FAR MORE THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE. TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS FOREVER. AMEN.